# 13

# Political Animation and Propaganda

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Political activity arises from living with others. It has an aesthetic dimension that includes appeals to the senses, to pleasure and to the non-instrumental qualities found in art and recreation. How this dimension is understood varies across historical and cultural contexts. Classical Greek philosophy distinguished rhetoric, the art of persuasion, from philosophy, the love of wisdom and pursuit of truth. This divide presented a fundamental dilemma for political actors: should service to their community be realized through rhetoric or philosophy, should it be grounded in persuasion or truth? In *The Republic*, Plato argues for philosophy but this does not preclude his usage of poetic devices such as the allegory of the cave, which famously aligns animation (shadow puppets at least) with illusion, ignorance and captivity. Likewise, Plato's argument for basing politics on philosophy includes concern for the capacity of poetry and music to disrupt social order and generate enthusiasm that can be manipulated for political purposes.

Contemporary animation is no less political. Even though today's arguments about aesthetics and politics take place on a different terrain, there remain concerns that aesthetic experience, that taste and sensorial pleasure, is thoroughly organized by structures of power. This implies that the experience of liking/disliking an animated film is social. It presupposes the presence of others who may judge the film differently or similarly. Spectator experience emerges through a complex intersection of identities (race, class, occupation, gender, sexuality, etc.), each of which has specific meaning and value in a given social order. And animation itself, whether

created by independent artists, a state government or transnational media company or some combination of these, likewise emerges through a matrix of intentions, practices, beliefs and materials. Social order and political power organize these complex fields.

To explore this complexity, this chapter follows two intersecting lines of inquiry: (1) the animation of politics and (2) the politics of animation. The former refers to animated films, media and performances that do politics, that support a position or make an argument that intervenes in a political debate or social crisis. The latter refers to the debates, issues, ideological differences and conflicts that exist within animation production, consumption and spectatorship. For brevity, I will restrict my comments to animation that directly engages politics and that remains prevalent today – namely caricature, cartoons, satire and propaganda. This focus is distinctly modern in that it primarily considers nation-state politics, industrial media and cel animation, which means the long history of puppets and politics has been omitted.[1]

The historical frame of this chapter is a reminder of the situatedness of the animation scholar. A key question for those studying animation is to ask how their political commitments inform their analyses. Analysis takes place within historical contexts shaped by political events and by the ideas and concepts in circulation. When organized into a structure such concepts constitute a theory or critical framework that can guide research questions and analysis. My approach draws upon the history of dialectical theory in that it considers the animation of politics and the politics of animation. By dialectical I do not mean that these two considerations lead to a synthesis, but that they facilitate shifting one's view of a problem or concept to expose different sets of inconsistencies and contradictions that are not necessarily resolvable. These include animation's contradictory aesthetic expressions, its relation to discursive power (systems of symbols, a social imaginary) and its relation to institutional power (the State/media companies) in production and reception.

## Caricature and political cartoons

Political animation has historical roots in many art forms, including theatre and literature, but the graphic arts of caricature and cartooning provide an especially rich heritage. Caricature can arguably be found in ancient cave drawings, but historians often trace the first political cartoon back to 1360 BC in Egypt, and there is a long history across many cultures of using zoomorphic images to marshal insults and discredit opponents in political disputes (Keane 2008). While 'caricature' is not medium specific, 'cartoon' refers to drawing on paper and is the more recent term. In the

modern era of political cartoons, early significant artists include William Hogarth (1697–1764) in England, Francisco Goya (1746–1828) in Spain, Honoré Daumier (1808–79) in France and Thomas Nast (1840–1902) in the United States. There is also a strong correlation between the rise of democracy, with its commitment to free expression, and the expansion of political cartoons (Keane 2008: 853–854). Such political and artistic developments function in concert with the invention and development of printing technology and contribute to the growth of political media, which begins to include animated films around the turn of the twentieth century.

In nineteenth-century France, caricature was commonly used to critique bourgeois society and political elites and featured prominently in illustrated magazines. By the beginning of the twentieth century this custom had evolved in response to political and technological changes. During this period the graphic artist Emile Cohl transitioned from political caricaturist to comic strip artist and then to animated filmmaker (Crafton 1990). Cohl's case, recounted by Donald Crafton, demonstrates how political, technological and artistic developments intersect within a person and a historical period. Cohl's evolution helps explain how the oppositional politics of caricature remain part of the legacy of animated cartoons that ridicule and parody everyday life.

In the United States, the longest-running scripted primetime TV series, *The Simpsons*, is an animated satire famous for irreverence and caricature aesthetics, including the occasional celebrity guest. Prior to *The Simpsons* and the glut of adult, satirical animation programming it inspired, the oppositional politics of caricature were evident in the work of the Warner Bros. animators of the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these animators used caricature to criticize Hollywood and its iconic star system and to expose the second-class status of animators working within the entertainment industry. Caricature remained a tool for aggression and criticism; it enabled animators to gain fictional control over their enemies by rendering them as two-dimensional caricatures, at once highly recognizable and grossly disfigured (Crafton 1993: 227).

This association between caricature and anti-elitism can also be traced back to nineteenth-century illustrated magazines in the United States which employed 'artist-reporters' or 'pictorial journalists' who commonly combined art and politics in an effort to serve and protect average citizens. This approach is famously represented by Thomas Nast's editorial caricatures. But caricature aesthetics are not restricted to anti-elitist, oppositional politics. Even in Nast's work caricatures of racial and ethnic minorities were commonplace and the lasting impacts of these prove that caricature aesthetics can be incredibly harmful. This is evident in the vestigial presence of blackface minstrelsy in contemporary American commercial animation (see Sammond 2015, reprinted in this volume).

The caricature's political capacity exists alongside its amusing incongruity in that it simultaneously presents a person's iconic traits and exaggerates them to such an extent that it dissolves the sanctification of the representational image. The image remains representational – it effectively refers to a person – but it breaks with the norms of representation. This makes the image and its referent more available to critique, play, but also disrespect. As Freud posited, the caricatured image of a person of high status degrades that status and renders that person more vulnerable to critique and ridicule (Freud 1905: 144). Caricatures of persons of low status affirm or exacerbate their vulnerability. This degradation effect can be approached through different questions. Are caricatures and cartoon aesthetics being used to render elites vulnerable to critique, or are they used to marshal stereotypes and prejudices against oppressed/marginalized groups? And how exactly do these biases, prejudices and stereotypes inform animation production and reception? Is there evidence of discrimination or political activity within the studio? Is reception influenced by a longer history of artistic/entertainment conventions?

## Propaganda: The intersection of discursive and institutional power

Animated propaganda is a common source for caricatures, stereotypes and political satire. The twentieth century, the age of cinema, was rife with global conflicts between nation-states and propaganda was crucial to mobilizing populations and promoting competing ideals and values during times of war. Many well-known animators active during the first half of the twentieth century produced propaganda using a variety of animation techniques. Albert E. Smith and James Stuart Blackton, for instance, made some of the earliest propaganda films in the United States during the Spanish-American War. Reportedly, *The Battle of Manila Bay* (1898) was filmed in a bathtub and *The Battle of Santiago Bay* (1898) was filmed using photographic cut-outs of battleships and cigarette smoke to simulate smoke from canon fire (Dewey 2016: 60–61). Winsor McCay's *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) is an early animated documentary and propaganda piece, intended to promote the US entry into the First World War, that demonstrates the dramatic capacity of cel animation. Propaganda utilizes all media forms of course, but as many governments and artists learned, cel animation and cartoon aesthetics were particularly effective at communicating factual, instructional content, comedic and dramatic scenarios, and satirical, disparaging attacks. During the Second World War, many governments had established departments of propaganda that utilized animation or maintained working relations with animation

studios. The Soviet Union, for example, established its Department of Agitation and Propaganda (agitprop) in the early 1920s. Imperial Japan relied on its Propaganda Department for animated propaganda shortly before and during the Second World War. And Nazi Germany developed its own German Animation Company, although it produced fewer animated propaganda films than the USSR or the United States (Bendazzi 2016: 148). Animated propaganda in the United States was produced commercially, but government contracts with animation studios were common and these effectively kept the Disney animation studio running during the war years. Likewise, British animation companies were contracted by the British Ministry of Information (MOI) to make propaganda.

As a media category, 'propaganda' is a challenging term because its meaning has changed over time and vernacular usage is inconsistent. The term originates from the Latin word *propagare* which means to propagate, and its institutional history began when the Catholic Church created a Congregation for Propagating the Faith in 1622. The subsequent modernization and secularization of the term has resulted in a series of pejorative connotations around media designed to spread ideals and values by non-rational or emotional means. Recent history has demonstrated that messages communicated through animated, audiovisual media and that employ culturally specific symbols, narratives and artistic conventions (discursive power) are likely to be compelling and fascinating despite a lack of rationality. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, propaganda has become more pervasive and intensive through the industrialization of media production under the auspices of private capital/ state funding (institutional power). It is clear from the growth of advertising and public relations that creating media that embody and promote ideals and values can be used to mobilize all kinds of groups, whether voters, consumers, employees or students. The pejorative connotations of the term derive from this condition and they gesture towards broad social problems. Large-scale propaganda campaigns diminish the amount of media space for truth-oriented content and they place a burden on individuals to exercise critical analysis. Propaganda's primary function is to advance a political cause. Its commitment to truth is negligible, which is why it often does not contribute to politics as directly as it purports. Propaganda injects a dose of distortion into a media environment which, even if helpful in the short term, can perpetuate confusion and harmful myths in the long term.

In practice, there are at least two basic kinds of propaganda: supporting propaganda, which embodies specific ideals and contributes to realizing them; and undermining propaganda, which embodies specific ideals but does not contribute to realizing them (Stanley 2015: 53). Distinguishing between supporting and undermining propaganda is often a matter of analysis and argument. Analysing animated propaganda might begin by following a series of inquiries. First, there is the sometimes difficult

process of distinguishing propaganda from media that happen to have propagandistic elements. Most studies of propaganda begin by outlining parameters (based on region, historical period, medium, political system, etc.) and by distinguishing between propaganda and media that have latent ideological content. Advertising and news media, for instance, do promote values, but in many cases this promotion is understood as secondary to the primary function of selling a product or reporting facts. Second, there is the process of identifying the communities, ideals and values involved, and then determining if the propaganda really contributes to realizing those values and ideals. This procedure may not be as straightforward as it sounds.

Consider, for example, the Oscar-winning Disney production *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943). This cartoon is a famous example of American anti-Nazi propaganda created using cel animation and composed in the Disney style. As was common to war propaganda, the short's comedy and plasmatic possibility provided comedic relief to audiences suffering from conditions of war (Sharm 2009: 76–77). But *Der Fuehrer's Face* also presents a degradation effect. The short consists of an extended dream sequence in which Donald Duck is subjected to the horrors of a hyperbolic totalitarian society. By depicting the restrictions of living under totalitarianism, the film supports American ideals of freedom. By caricaturing Nazis and Hitler, it degrades the American enemy, giving confidence to American soldiers and civilians. Granted, it is equally true that the cartoon trivializes the horrors of the Nazi regime and creates a safe distance from that reality, and it does not provide many historical facts for political deliberation. One might argue that it supports the defence of American democracy, and therefore is an instance of supporting propaganda, but it is not in itself the most democratic form of expression since it dismisses and disrespects the Nazi perspective. And that seems entirely acceptable given the Nazi threat at the time and their crimes against humanity.

The complication for democratic society is that freedom of expression protects propaganda, but propaganda is rarely conducive to reasonable, respectful political debate (Stanley 2015: 94). In this sense, propaganda tactics are not politically beneficial in democratic processes in which one hopes to be treated reasonably by a political opponent and may need to work with that opponent in the future. *Der Fuehrer's Face*'s promotion of American values to American audiences is not part of a democratic process but demonstrates the one-sidedness and disinterest in other perspectives that is common to wartime propaganda. It also highlights the intersection of commercial and political interests facilitated by nationalism. Commercially produced animated propaganda can be both profitable and political through its use of culturally specific techniques and aesthetics. This intersection was common in American animation during the Second World War (Shull and Wilt 1987), and earlier examples can be found in British animated films from the First World War (Ward 2003 and 2005).

The historical and cultural specificity of animated propaganda provides opportunities to investigate the symbols and associations that constitute the social imaginary that propagandists and audiences draw upon.[2] For example, the Second World War propaganda films feature distinct aesthetic strategies that relied on cultural traditions and government-coordinated media campaigns. Nazi propaganda tended to utilize live-action newsreel footage more than staged or animated film, and this correlated with their totalitarian ideology which sought to control reality (Kracauer 1942). Cel animation was common in American and Japanese propaganda from the Second World War and both included instances of speciesism: when racial/ethnic identities are translated into human and non-human animal relations. Speciesist depictions are regularly used to dehumanize an opponent in order to justify military action. Thomas LaMarre observes, however, that although Japanese and American Second World War animations give representation to the racialized imaginaries of both countries, these imaginaries varied and led to different deployments. American wartime animation commonly depicted Japanese characters as savage animals. Japanese wartime animation did not depict Americans as animals, but as 'failed human beings, as demons, ogres, or fiends' (LaMarre 2008: 76). When Japanese animation did deploy speciesism, it translated the identities of other Asian cultures into 'cute, friendly, and accommodating' animal characters (LaMarre 2008: 78 and 2010). These depictions were hardly innocent as they correlated with Imperial Japan's hierarchical vision of its colonies, but they suggest a significant difference between Asian colony and American enemy in the Japanese imagination at the time. These different usages of speciesist imagery indicate how racial/ethnic associations and zoomorphic depictions have distinct patterns of circulation and meaning. It is precisely these patterns and traditional associations that propaganda seeks to invoke and possibly redeploy.

LaMarre, like many media scholars, bolsters his analysis of aesthetic and symbolic elements with an analysis of political economy, which considers the economic and political institutions and relations involved in the production of media. This creates a fuller picture of an animation's ideals, values and political dynamics. Consider, for instance, the first British animated feature film *Animal Farm* (Halas and Batchelor 1954), an adaptation of George Orwell's novella published in 1945 which critiques the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union through an allegory in which animals on a farm overthrow their human master only to be later subjugated by the farm's pigs. The film was covertly funded by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through American producer Louis de Rochemont. Although removed by several layers, the CIA monitored the production and insisted on changes when they thought it necessary (Leab 2005: 238–241). The film's production speaks to the ideological alliance between the United States and Britain and it demonstrates how state power can operate through commercial channels.

In general, state-produced propaganda, such as Soviet agitprop, differs from commercially produced propaganda, such as that in the United States, at the level of animator autonomy. The simple formulation is that in a liberal democratic society non-governmental entities are free to produce whatever they want. Despite the chaos of this freedom, ideology, or a shared system of ideas, is reproduced and gains an organic appearance because there are, in theory, no top-down, restrictions over media production (hence, the significance of *Animal Farm* as a counter example). In modern democracy, media power is often described as a means for engineering or manufacturing consent because it is through media that ideas are voluntarily shared and affirmed. In an authoritarian state in which the government controls media production, there is a straightforward acknowledgement of top-down ideological programmes. In these cases, it is usually more interesting to analyse the continued creation of subversive media and subversive interpretations of media. The general point here is that closer examinations often reveal case-specific negotiations between state power and commercial power and between individual actors and the systems within which they operate.

## Conclusion: Modernism and critical theory

The early twentieth century was a formative period for animated propaganda, but at the same time, animation more broadly defined attracted many modernist artists, especially for its capacity to resist and trouble representation. Like the degrading effect of caricature, the animated line can disrupt and resist representational and realistic aesthetics. In the early twentieth century, these aesthetics were maligned for concealing class conflicts, inequality, and the reality of political, social and technological changes – not unlike commodities that do not disclose how they are made or which groups benefit the most from their production. Individual artists and movements (e.g. Dadaism, Futurism, Soviet constructivism and Surrealism, among others) turned to animation techniques for different reasons. But for many of these artists, animation techniques had a politics to them, whether it was challenging conventions of representational, perspectival painting or experimenting with the possible combinations of photography and motion or using cartoons to parody or critique ideological positions (Leslie 2004). These techniques facilitated aesthetic responses to modernity, specifically the shocks, fragmentation and alienation associated with the industrialization of labour, the rationalization of time, increasing urbanization, the growth of capitalism, and technological changes in media and transportation. This legacy persists in animation forms that align the subversion of representational/perceptual norms with the subversion of

social and political norms. This legacy counters the valuation of accurate iconic representation – that the image resembles the person or thing to which it refers. As many animation theorists point out, the further removed from recognizable reality a cartoon becomes, the less likely it is to be judged seriously (Wells 2002: 108). This can be useful for artists seeking to evade censorship and/or deliver biting criticism.

In dialogue with the critical work of artists, theorists studying the political consequences of cinema and mass media developed new methodologies during the twentieth century. Scholarship produced during the 1930s by theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University Frankfurt (also known as the Frankfurt School) analysed popular culture for the purposes of understanding deep political problems within societies. In a well-known argument, Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, suggested that cartoons such as Mickey Mouse facilitated collective laughter and fantasy as a kind of therapy or expression of playful possibility that answered the conditions of modernity. Theodor Adorno countered that Disney cartoons merely present the violence and mutilation of modern life in a humorous, seemingly benign form (Hansen 1993, 2012). The shadow of these oppositional claims persists today in that cartoons still tend to express possibility and metaphysical relief, but also violence, futility and industrial rationalization. Such dialectical readings of cartoons and animation find their fullest articulation in Sergei Eisenstein's (2011) writings from the 1940s, but they remain common and typically highlight competing expressions of life and death, movement and stasis, and freedom and constraint. Such expressions have purchase on a host of political issues ranging from hierarchical valuations of life (Chen 2012) to the alienation of labour (Leslie 2013).

Animation labour has been a consistent topic for critical study given political concerns over exploitation and discrimination and the capacity for cartoon aesthetics to conceal the conditions of their production. Concerns range historically from the industrial era to today's global, digital production environment, and they range from studies of gender-based discrimination to studies of the precarious conditions of international workers. Although labour issues are beyond the scope of this chapter, they are central to understanding the history of media conglomerates, globalization and digital infrastructure. Within the last twenty-five years, digital media practices have blurred the lines between consumer, viewer, user and producer, and raised new questions about animation labour and politics. This includes the categorization of fan activity and how it serves/complicates the interests of powerful media companies. The pervasiveness of animation in today's media environment has shaped politics quite broadly through the continued use of caricature, cartoons, satire and propaganda, and in quotidian ways through the expansion of digital tools and the use of animated computer graphics to enhance just about everything – from local news to the websites of political

organizations. Understanding these developments and intervening in them requires critical enquiry into discursive and institutional forms of power, which means asking questions about animation forms and aesthetics and their intersections with people, practices and ideas.

# Notes

1　For my view of how puppets and animated cartoons engage modern philosophy and political theory, see Herhuth (2015).

2　Scott Lash and Celia Lury use the term 'social imaginary' to refer to the collective memory and imagination of media users and audiences (2007: 182).

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